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Comment

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Comment by the Editor

THE FABULOUS FIFTIES

According to the census of 1850 the population of Iowa numbered 192,214. Nearly ninety per cent of these pioneers were Americans and fully one-fourth were natives of Iowa. Many of the original settlers came from the South — from North Carolina, Virginia, Maryland, Tennessee, and Kentucky — down the Ohio River, up the Mississippi, and then, forking off at every tributary, they staked their claims and lived as they had always lived in the thin fringes of timber along the streams. For several years after Iowa was admitted into the Union, the Southern element in the population retained its prominence and Southern influence continued to be felt decisively in politics and in the manners of the people.

But a new era dawned. The decade from 1850 to 1860 was probably the most remarkable ten years in the whole history of Iowa. The entire State was opened to settlement and a mighty flood of immigration poured across the borders and swept out upon the great open prairie. For miles and miles, day after day, the highways of Illinois were "lined with cattle and wagons" pushing ever westward. At one place seventeen hundred and forty-three wagons passed in a single month, all bound for Iowa. Twenty thousand immigrants went through Burling-

ton in thirty days. The ferries at Dubuque were equally busy. "Daily — yes, hourly" — settlers arrived "from Ohio, Kentucky, Indiana, and Illinois." An endless procession of "large canvas-backed wagons, densely populated", moved toward the interior — "a mighty army of invasion". By hundreds and thousands they came, "from the hills and valleys of New England", gathering fresh accretions from the resolute and hardy population of New York, Ohio, and Indiana as they swept onward. "Still they come! By railways and steamers", exclaimed a Keokuk newspaper. "By the side of this exodus, that of the Israelites becomes an insignificant item, and the greater migrations of later times are scarcely to be mentioned." Stagecoaches in Washington County were "crowded with passengers, piled in, shaken down, and running over".

For the first time immigrants made their homes on the open prairie. "The first trickle of the human stream which for two centuries seeped slowly through the forests like a flood held back by fallen leaves and brushwood," wrote Herbert Quick in his autobiography, "at last burst forth in a freshet of men and women" who for generations had watched the sunset "through traceries of the twigs and leafage of the primal forest" and finally stood "with the forests behind them, gazing with dazzled eyes sheltered under the cupped hands of toil out over a sea of grassy hillocks, while standing in the full light of the sun." They were the true prairie dwellers.

Out along the Mormon Trail, the old Ridge Road, and many other westward routes the prairie schooners made their way to Council Bluffs, to the Fort Dodge country, to the rich valleys of the Cedar, Iowa, and Des Moines rivers, and even to the fateful vicinity of Spirit Lake. Men stood in line at the land offices until their feet were frozen, while some who secured a number designating the order of their appearance had time to go home and put in the crops before their turn. Doing "a land office business" became a significant phrase in Iowa during the fifties.

By 1860 the population of Iowa had more than trebled. The Southern element was almost lost in the Northern migration, yet more than a fourth of all the inhabitants were still native-born Iowans. Through years of flood and drought and cholera, in spite of the panic of 1857, with scarcely a shudder at the Spirit Lake massacre, Iowa continued to prosper. Several railroads pushed far toward the Missouri; the telegraph came; and fields of wheat and corn checkered the prairie. Towns, well supplied with mills, schools, churches, and stores, sprang up as by magic — in fact as well as on paper. In politics the new Republican party, under the leadership of James W. Grimes, accepted the challenge of the slavery issue and took control of the State government. The capital was changed from Iowa City to Des Moines, and a new Constitution was adopted.

J. E. B.